

Luck in locks

Invention that creates a cascade of natural curls in 'Oprah' contest

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Sonya "Sistah Nandi" Gilkey has a new idea for natural hair all locked up.

The Atlanta resident has worn locks for more than a decade, starting back when the style was not seen as professional.



Mikki K. Harris/Staff
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Sonya 'Sistah Nandi' Gilkey styles Nyesha Samuel's hair. Her curls were created using Gilkey's Wrap-A-Loc tool and technique. 'They say necessity is the mother of invention,' Gilkey says, 'and that's what this was.' She has entered her invention in a contest sponsored by Oprah Winfrey and the QVC shopping channel.

Now she's come up with an alternative for people who prefer locks or natural hairstyles, but want to look more professional and have more hair versatility.

Gilkey has created Wrap-A-Loc, a tool and a technique that transform locks into spirals and curls. "They say necessity is the mother of invention," said Gilkey. "And that's what this was."

Gilkey recently returned from Chicago, where she entered Wrap-A-Loc in a national inventors' contest sponsored by Oprah Winfrey and the QVC home shopping channel that could bring national attention to her product.

"It was like a warehouse," Gilkey said, describing the 1,600 inventors and the products they'd displayed for judging in Oprah's Search for the Next Big Idea. "There were lots of anxious people there. ... I got to see how many more people are out there with visions and aspirations."

From the Chicago session and others to be held in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, 10 people will be selected to appear on "Oprah" to tell about their products, and the audience will choose a winner.

The winner will appear on a QVC program and receive financial help with packaging and promotional spots on QVC. Gilkey will learn on April 27 whether she is a finalist.

The idea for Wrap-A-Loc has evolved over four years, since Gilkey decided to change the look of her locks, which had grown past her waist.

"The key to everything is timing. Natural hair and locks are so popular now. There was once a time when you couldn't go into corporate America with locks," said Gilkey, a Delta Air Lines reservations sales agent.

Gilkey said she refers to her hairstyle as "locks" because she said the term "dreadlocks" came from the slave trade and was used to describe the uncombed hair of a black person.

"I say 'locks' because that's what our hair does," she said. "We're proud of our hair, and there's nothing dreadful about the way my hair looks."

Gilkey presented her idea at hair and trade shows and to various stylists at workshops, modeling the finished product herself from prototypes made by her family and friends.

She built a following across the country, but wanted to go even farther. She participated in an entrepreneur program called the EDGE Connection at Kennesaw State University through which she gained access to marketing consultants, attorneys and accountants. She learned to build a Web site and market her concept. That led to yearlong negotiations and tweaking to end up with the product that was delivered for the first time in January from her manufacturer, Suntek Global in Taiwan.

The beauty of the flexible tool is that it can be worn undetected in the hair as a style, but when it's removed, curls blossom.

"Because it's a whole new concept and because locks are very popular and a lot of us are into natural hair, there's a lot of education necessary," she said. "The stylists become my distributors. It becomes another service and product they can offer through their shops."

Gilkey, who has been nominated for a best product innovation award from the Association for Enterprise Opportunity this year, is putting together an instructional video to help teach the Wrap-A-Loc technique to clients.

And as for the QVC contest winner to be chosen on "Oprah," she said, "Just getting there [to the show] makes you a winner."
